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JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION



Centre international de recherches sur les communautés coopératives rurales
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המרכז הבין-לאומי לחקר קהילות כפריות שיתופיות

CIRCOM

CIRCOM, International Research Centre on Rural Cooperative Communities was established in September 1965 in Paris.

The purpose of the Centre is to provide a framework for investigations and research on problems concerning rural cooperative communities and publication of the results, to coordinate the exchange of information on current research projects and published works, and to encourage the organization of symposia on the problems of cooperative rural communities, as well as the exchange of experts between different countries.

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Reciprocity and Rural Development in the Action of Two Farmer Cooperatives

by

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Abstract

Rural development has raised attention after the crisis of classical theories of social change and after the European Union has shown great concern for rural spaces *in lieu* of agricultural firms. These new trends, often summarized as “endogenous and sustainable development”, are based mostly on reciprocity as a peculiar, though seldom clarified, way of interaction. A self-sustained development requires the local people’s ability to cooperate, to trust each other. In this article the concept of reciprocity is analyzed. The theoretical material is then applied to two farmer cooperatives operating in the Po Delta, Italy, one on the Venetian bank, and the other in the Emilia-Romagna bank, with the aim of verifying whether rural development is an aim of these local actors. Reciprocity results as a foundation principle of cooperation and as a useful tool to understand the strategies of the two cooperatives. The so-called “territorial strategy” (oriented towards the local community) is not carried out as the two cooperatives are committed almost totally to a commercial strategy.

Introduction

For many reasons, rural development seems to have lost its importance in both policies and research projects. The crisis of the two main interpretations of rural marginality (see the theories of modernization and dependence) has induced scholars to concentrate on the social construction of “rurality” rather than on the objective cultural and material differences between town and countryside (Mormont, 1987).

By contrast, in the past decade the European Union has placed considerable emphasis on this subject because of its concern about the impact of depopulation on the environment, the food supply and the standard of living. Moreover, the intention of the EU is to reform agricultural policy by shifting it from farm development support to rural development. In other words, it wants to pay closer attention to the general living conditions of the rural population, rather than those of farms.

In this context, farmers and their organizations should change their attitudes towards public policies and models of development. The so-called “productivist”

model is not suited to the new EU philosophy and to the new functions assigned to rural areas. There is a danger that the agricultural world will modify its attitudes, behavior and direction while still regarding development with the same eyes as the productivist model. Rural development entails development of every dimension of the local community, not just firms efficiency and innovation. In this sense, reciprocity and cooperation are valid tools for analyzing local development.

Farmer cooperatives are useful for verifying whether the new development philosophy has penetrated rural areas. These organizations were created in order to improve the farmers work according to the solidarity principle. What does this principle mean in the new context of local development? According to some authors, cooperatives are inspired by the same cultural goals (Gatel, 1987; Gray and Mahoney, 1992) but have lost their original character of solidarity mark and are now firms like all others (Rosa, 1991). Even the mutuality principle is neglected when cooperatives are very large in size. However, in a country like Italy where cooperation has deep ideological and social roots, one expects to find a sensitiveness to solidarities that goes beyond the cooperative's members.

There are essentially two issues involved here. The first is whether cooperatives are involved in new rural development projects. Are they committed to the welfare of local people, even if they are not members of cooperatives? The second is whether reciprocity is a good criterion with which to understand cooperative life, with particular regard to the new challenges raised by the development perspective. The aim of the paper is thus twofold: it is firstly theoretical (the heuristic role of reciprocity) and secondly empirical (the action taken by cooperatives to encourage local development).

The subject matter of the following analysis are the strategies pursued by two farm cooperatives in the Po delta, a marginal area in northeastern Italy: these strategies will be analyzed in the third section. In the second one, the reciprocity concept is explained while seeking to elaborate some of its relations with territorial development. It is assumed that territorial development concerns the economy, ecological sustainability and reciprocity relations among local people.

Reciprocity and territorial development

According to Polanyi (1983), reciprocity relates, as a form of integration, to the movement of goods and services between symmetrically arranged corresponding points. The main features of this concept are the following; first, the exchange is symmetric – that is, it must happen and it must be equal; second, what is exchanged may differ and the time of restitution is not formally established; third, the flexibility of return does not undermine equality; indeed, it is the distinctive feature of reciprocity.

This concept links with other two forms of integration: exchange and redistribution. In the former case, the allocation of goods is bilateral and ruled

by prices; this form of integration takes place in the market. In the latter case, the allocation works through a centre; redistribution is performed by the political authority. These integration activities, according to Polanyi, are performed by different communities: for reciprocity it is the community of relatives, friends, association members; for redistribution there is a formal institution (authority); and for the market the point of reference is self-regulation by members.

This seminal threefold typology was Polanyi's answer to the contention that the market is the only allocative institution. He attacked the idea that the market was the natural form of exchange (Cella, 1985). But the concept of reciprocity has been developed by other traditions of thought as well, which can be summarized as follows:

- *rational choice theory*, which sees reciprocity as the outcome of a repeated game among rational actors, the only condition being that the first action in the exchange should be cooperation (Axelrod, 1985). Thus, solidarity may arise even among egoistically motivated actors. The actor, after numerous attempts to exploit others, realizes that cooperation is more advantageous;
- the *normativist approach* views reciprocity as a universal norm. According to the anthropological tradition, reciprocity is the foundation of communal life. It is the feature that marks the difference between humans and animals. According to functionalists, it is a major source of stability and peace in interpersonal and groups relations (Gouldner, 1960). The duty of restitution in equivalent terms reduces violence and aggression in relationships. In the end, society is well integrated when its members have assimilated the value of reciprocity;
- the *psycho-social approach* sees reciprocity as an efficient way to keep two opposite trends united: the need to distinguish oneself (identity) and the need to feel oneself similar to others (identification) (Recchi, 1993). In fact, it leaves one free as to what to return while at the same time enforcing the return. A person can to some extent distinguish him/herself by means of a diversified restitution content, but must take account of the others, who always expect a return.

These various traditions view reciprocity in functional terms. However, the freedom to give what and when one likes is a good basis for innovation in both entrepreneurial and in social relational terms. Exchanges can be promoted in new terms while knowing that the relationship is in any case safe. Risks can be taken, modifying the content and maintaining the form of exchange stable. Thus, reciprocity can be a way to promote social change; it can explain *statu nascenti* situations (Boccaccin, 1990).

Other points concern the coexistence of different forms of allocation. Authors agree that reciprocity is to be found not only in families or associations but also in many other institutions. Thus, a different mix of forms of allocation can be discerned in every institution (Bradach and Eccles, 1991). All the principles operate in the state: authority, mainly, but also exchange (for example, investments for consensus) and reciprocity (for example, the appeal to fatherland army service). Also in the family, which is centred on love, material rewards or corporal punishment are applied.

The last problem is whether there exist differences internally to the concept of reciprocity. Sahlins (1965:147-152) identified three kinds of reciprocity, according to the degree of affection (or social distance) of relationship: *generalized* reciprocity, where the restitution expectation is temporarily non-defined; *balanced* reciprocity, where the exchange is more formal or regulated by traditions; and *negative* reciprocity, where the exchange is performed with strangers or the enemy. In this latter case, reciprocal exploitation, hostility and deception very frequently arise. Recchi (1993:481) suggests that the last category should be split into two, so that negative reciprocity refers only to interactions in which the aim is to hurt others, while *complementary* reciprocity is exchange based on roles. In this case expectations are not linked to persons but to their roles. This kind of reciprocity is very widespread in modern societies. The expectation is addressed to the institutions not to single persons. From another point of view, complementary reciprocity involves the so-called anonymous gift (Godbout, 1993:101), which is the gift given to the collectivity. The most frequently-cited example is the gift of blood. The actor gives to the collectivity in the expectation of a very large and sure return in an indefinite time in the future.

However, these typologies are too simple; they are linked to the classical sociological dichotomy between "community" and "society" and usually associated with evolutionary models which envisage an automatic passage from traditional to modern society (Donati, 1996). The degree of affection and the distinction between generalized and role reciprocity fail to clarify the situation when reciprocity is based on a low degree of affection as well as on poorly formalized roles. The concept of reciprocity is clear as regards the family (generalized reciprocity) and the state (role reciprocity), but when applied to a large cooperative or a small municipality, it cannot be easily included in one of the preceding categories. In these cases, the people know each other but they are not necessarily friends. They have roles but – since the structure is quite small – these are less rigid. In short, they are mixed cases.

One way to obtain a more complete typology is to examine the sources of reciprocity. In this case, at least two factors seem important: *belonging* and *expertise*. Persons enter a reciprocal relationship because they belong to the same category (class, race, gender, ideology...). They start a reciprocal relationship because they

recognize that each is an expert. Thus, reciprocity is developed in a cooperative because all its members are more or less in the same social situation. In the same cooperative, reciprocity among people with different roles is possible because everyone recognizes that the others are doing their work competently.

It is difficult to decide which classification (or combination of classifications) is more pertinent. In any case, it is clear that a dual distinction is too simple. The usual opposition between traditional, emotional, personal reciprocity, on the one hand, and modern, neutral and impersonal reciprocity, on the other, is not enough.

An interesting aspect is the interference between reciprocity and space. Generally speaking, it is assumed that generalized reciprocity is typical of local interactions. When someone knows and meets other people directly and frequently in a restricted space, it is easier for an exchange based on generalized reciprocity to arise. By contrast, when the relationship is non-direct, impersonal, without presence in the same space, complementary or role reciprocity is the norm. Hence the global dimension is added to this second kind of reciprocity. In short, physical presence is the criterion for distinction between general and complementary reciprocity. Yet the distinction is not so easy. Relations with neighbors may be simply governed by role reciprocity (the reciprocal expectation that silence will be respected in a block of flats), while general reciprocity can be established with distant and impersonal institutions. For example, a citizen may place profound trust in the state; a militant may have temporarily indefinite and broad expectations of a party leader whom s/he has never met.

Although presence/absence in a circumscribed space does not absolutely distinguish among kinds of reciprocity, we may say that presence, coexistence and personal contacts are better conditions for creating generalized reciprocity. The spatial dimension is crucial because people want to be involved more directly in decision-making. "More directly" means personal attendance, direct participation, a physical meeting with others. In other words, it means that people prefer reciprocity based on face-to-face relations on several grounds, particularly life-threatening situations (Prandini, 1996). Health and environmental goods are appropriate examples. Science, as an expert system that rules people, is placed under scrutiny because it is no longer trusted. People want to know more and they want to be directly involved in decision-making (see environmental impact assessment). In conclusion, on some occasions and for some vital matters, complementary reciprocity is not enough.

Spatial circumscribed reciprocity has been assumed not only as a claim in decision-making but also as a factor in the success of economic development. An industrial district is based on a large number of reciprocal interactions in a restricted space. In other words, it has been noted that in a production organization of this particular kind, exchanges without clear time-restitution are very frequent.

According to Zamagni (1997:52-53), industrial districts display two typical features: non-intentionality and close relations among economic agents. The absence of long-term plans and the high frequency of relationships create a milieu favorable to cooperation and innovation. Reciprocity should not be confused with altruism: agents are motivated by rational goals. But the expectation of a return is removed to a distant future; the exchange among actors is not affected by a short-term reward. Zamagni (1997:53) argues that economic activities based on reciprocity generate a virtuous circle of development. In this sense, non-profit firms are the basis of for-profit economies.

It is difficult to construe the relations between reciprocity and sustainable development. The concept behind sustainable development is that the same amount of natural resources should be left to future generations as are enjoyed at the moment (Bruntland, 1989). Environmental protection now will not be returned to the same persons. Here, reciprocity is understood in extreme terms. It can be better understood in societies that emphasize close bonds of blood and descent, and in which the gift of the first generation will perhaps be returned – in the form of a better environment – to the next one. It is important to note that in this case the real beneficiary is the clan or, better, the clans continuity. In other words, from the perspective of sustainable development, reciprocity is an intergenerational exchange. In modern societies, action for sustainable development is an anonymous gift for which restitution is unlikely. It is therefore behavior based more on altruism than on reciprocity. However, a person may take action to defend the environment for future generations in the expectation of a return in another field – for example health or a pension. This person's trust in the collectivity is so high that s/he works for a not-returnable good (the environment) while expecting to be compensated with other goods. This is a further and important feature of reciprocity: not only is the time of restitution unclear but also its content.

The case studies

The farms associated in the two cooperatives examined grow cereals, sugar beet, lucerne, and rice. Relatively small in size, in recent years they have also begun horticulture. Both the land and the farms are young: the land has been reclaimed over the last one hundred years and was given to small farmers or workers in the 1950s and 1960s under land reform projects. Both cooperatives were created by the Land Reform Agency (Ente Delta Padano) as a form of support for new farmers. This public body has had representatives on the cooperatives' administrative boards since the mid-1970s.

The Po delta is considered marginal because of the high rate of unemployment and the low rate of education (CDS, 1997; Rullani, 1995). The area used to be very poor and witnessed fierce conflict between landowners and workers. The Po river delta is the most important wetland in the country and is one of the outstanding

natural assets codified in the 1971 International Convention of Ramsar. There are various projects for creating natural parks in the area (Osti, forthcoming).

The two cooperatives have very similar geographic and social backgrounds but they belong to different administrative regions: Veneto, with Venice as its regional capital, and Emilia-Romagna with Bologna. The two regions have different political traditions: Veneto was dominated by the Christian Democrats and is now governed by a right wing coalition; Emilia-Romagna was and is still dominated by the former Communist Party. Cooperative structures and cultures also differ between the two regions. The Emilia-Romagna cooperative network Casa Giralda has made great efforts to merge and integrate individual cooperatives. It has absorbed a number of small cooperatives and must produce a large range of horticulture products in order to maintain its position in the network.

Table 1. Basic features of the two cooperatives

Name of Cooperative	Cosva	Casa Giralda
Municipality	Portotolle	Codigoro
Region	Veneto	Emilia-Romagna
No. of members	500	200
Members' hectares	6,000	2,000
Budget (Ecu)	~10.5 million	~7.4 million
of which, for horticulture	2.6 million	3.7 million
Structures	3 warehouses	3 warehouses
	1 maize dryer	1 maize dryer
Permanent employees	11	7
Services to farmers	provision of technical tools and sale of their products	

The two cooperatives enjoy relatively stable financial situations, and there are no major difficulties regarding their membership and leadership, although they foresee problems in the market and the political situation. They have adopted various strategies in order to adjust to the globalization of markets (that means lower prices and better quality) and recent EU policy trends (that means less support to product prices):

- **increasing farm size.** In other words, the creation of scale economies, which at the cooperative level means the merging of small cooperatives into larger units (Zan, 1984);
- **reducing labor costs.** The problem here is seasonal workers, who are few in number and closely protected by the law and by the local institutions. According to the cooperatives, these workers cost too much and are not flexible;
- **diversifying and increasing the quality of agricultural products.** The

strategy is twofold: introducing new varieties, as was done some years ago with the introduction of horticulture, and closer specification of the quality of product given by farmers to the cooperative so that it can diversify its supply to the market;

- **providing the local community with services (territorial strategy).** This may be an extreme type of diversification where the target is not agricultural activities but other activities which are complementary or completely new. Services to the local community include environmental protection (*i.e.* against floods), the sponsorship of cultural and sport activities, social work for the poor or elderly people, and so on.

Reciprocity is a good criterion with which to understand each of these strategies. Apart from the first (scale economies), the concept of reciprocity clarifies how the strategy can operate. As regards the second strategy, the cooperative should reduce its labor costs by entering a pact with seasonal workers which involves a reciprocity exchange. For example, it could establish that lower earnings *now* will bring more advantages *later*, for both farmers and workers, when greater local development has been achieved. In recent years, trade unions, interest groups and public bodies in Italy have undertaken similar pacts called “territorial agreements” (*patti territoriali*). Under these agreements each social actor accepts a reduction in its present earnings in exchange for greater development in the future. The state incentivates these agreements with grants.

As for the third strategy (diversification and the search for quality), it is evident that the market does not always and at once recognize better quality or new products through higher prices. A risk consequently arises which a cooperative can accept, on behalf of individual farmers, by introducing new varieties and more sophisticated methods of quality evaluation. It may invest in innovations from which the immediate return is not clear. This choice entails a great deal of trust by the farmers in the cooperative. They must believe that the cooperative is doing its best in the market.

For the fourth strategy (services to local community) reciprocity means that the cooperative invests money in local people and awaits a low or no-profit return. This, however, improves the community’s well-being, thereby improving the image of the area, and a good territorial image is one of the most important factors in food quality. This is an exemplary case of generalized exchange.

What are the two cooperatives doing in relation to these strategies? As regards reducing their labor costs, they do not have sufficient prestige to establish a pact with seasonal workers. In this field the cooperatives do not matter; they do not affect the issue. The most frequently strategy is to use family or informal work, so that the problem is addressed within the family “clan”. For the moment, there has been no recourse to the other and extreme solution of employing non-European Union

workers.

Concerning diversification, the two cooperatives feel that the farmers do not trust them. The farmers have a very low level of reciprocity and want to see results as soon as possible. Once the price is lower than their expectations, they are ready to withdraw their trust or membership. Hence cooperatives are reluctant to introduce new evaluation criteria on quality, or to suggest new varieties. If they do not achieve an immediate economic return, they lose the farmers consensus. Moreover, the introduction of new evaluation criteria – which should be quite straightforward for the melons that both cooperatives produce – is seen as a problem for farmers used to equal treatment. So, the managers assure a low profile consensus to the cooperative through an egalitarian practice. They assure to everybody the same basic remuneration in order to prevent any criticism.

The two cooperatives do very little as regards territorial services, and those services that they provide are proposed by the cooperative federation, which is therefore perceived as an external pressure. Social or cultural services are very distant from the mentalities of these cooperatives and their farmers.

There are a number of differences between the two cooperatives. The one in Veneto is more isolated from the local institutions, from the cooperative consortia and from farmers' trade unions. It is also less integrated with environmental policies, especially with those that concern natural parks. Together with other cooperatives it has founded an industry that produces also organic tomato juice, but it does very little in order to promote organic products among their own farmers. The cooperative is formally neutral in its attitude to the project of a natural park but the single farmers are openly hostile to it. The cooperative has also clashed with the municipality and with the producers' association. Complementary agro-tourism activities are left to the individual farmer.

The Emilia-Romagna cooperative is more closely integrated into the cooperative network promoting environmental and agri-tourism services. Some years ago it absorbed a small cooperative that produced only organic food. Casa Giralda belongs to a consortium – called *Verde Delta* – which sells its products to tourists along the main roads in the region. The cooperative helps farmers wishing to provide accommodation and restaurant services (agri-tourism), and it is currently investigating ways to protect farmlands against flooding and to receive compost from the local waste disposal public company. These various projects have been suggested or promoted by the provincial federation of cooperatives or by regional consortium of cooperatives (CONERPO); they are not really spontaneous activities of the cooperative. The same thing applies to the LEADER (*Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*) projects. This is an EU initiative which seeks to promote endogeneous development in rural areas by means of projects involving a pool of local private and public bodies, called *Local Action Group*. The

Regional Consortium with other partners is the real actor that prepares the proposals for LEADER. Moreover, in the Local Action Group there is the consortium and not the single cooperative. Casa Giralda has simply to implement the projects. On the other hand, COSVA – the Veneto cooperative – has some problems with its consortium and risks being even omitted from LEADER project. The Emilia-Romagna cooperative sponsors a local football team, while the other cooperative ceased any form of sponsorship some time ago.

Conclusion

Reciprocity seems to be a good criterion for analyzing the strategies pursued by cooperatives and their relationship with the local community. It is also a concept which sheds useful light on problems internal to a cooperative.

At the moment the two cooperatives – to differing extents – are seeking to improve their vertical integration, that is, to achieve a more prominent and more aggressive presence in the global market. The order from the consortium is “join the supply”, which means increasing the amount and range of products supplied to large retailers in order to gain more power in negotiations. This strategy is so advanced that consortia of farmers’ cooperatives in Emilia-Romagna are buying farms and agro-industrial companies in the southern hemisphere. In other words, they are following the globalization of markets.

It is clear that the cooperatives have lost a large amount of independence. They must follow consortia instructions if they want to stay in the market with large (no-niche) productions. This is more evident in Emilia-Romagna where the cooperative network is much more closely integrated (Petroni, 1997). The Veneto cooperative is less integrated with the cooperative system and with the retailer companies and sells its products through single market operators (*intermediari*). However, the differences between the two cooperatives derive more from their belonging to cooperative systems with different degrees of integration than from strategies chosen at the local level (Gherardi and Masiero, 1990). In this sense, the territorial strategy is very weak in both cases.

It is not easy to ascertain whether the territorial strategy is neglected because integration in the global market is very exacting or because the Italian agriculture is culturally closed to new perspectives in rural development (Barham, 1997). In this climate it is difficult to view farmers as leaders of a trend which is radically changing EU policy and funding allocation. It is also difficult to conceive of farmers’ cooperatives as special firms committed to solidarity towards non-members. There is evidence that inside and outside solidarity are not in opposition. The examples of a pact with seasonal workers and of a return in the form of an enhanced image for cooperative products show that commitment to local problems are in the long term advantageous. This is true reciprocity. Hence the problem for cooperatives is not only to introduce more market or more authority into their management (Nicolini,

1987); they must also gain better understanding of how reciprocity works. If they do, the cooperatives' special status may be preserved.

It is therefore necessary to conduct close analysis of the relationship between reciprocity and space. The reaction to globalization is not simply a tighter local network. The kind of relationship must be understood. Particularly intriguing is the operation of "reciprocity" chains – that is, how general and personal reciprocity is converted into institutional or role reciprocity, and vice versa. In terms of the cooperatives themselves, investigation is required of how a local cooperative can integrate with consortia (federations of cooperatives, producers' associations, etc.) without losing its specific operational principle of face-to-face trust. What mechanisms are needed to tie the individual farmer to the president of a consortium working at the global level? There are types of reciprocity chain (see patron-client relationships in Korovkin, 1988; Roniger, 1988) that are not exportable to the cooperative sphere. However, the study of those processes – where personal and role reciprocity are clearly mixed – is very promising.

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